

MEMORANDUM

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NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

1662

INFORMATIONSECRET/SENSITIVE

March 27, 1973

MEMORANDUM FOR: MR. KISSINGER

FROM: JOHN H. HOLDRIDGE *Welfa*

SUBJECT: CIA Study on Cambodian Political Situation

Attached at Tab A is a memorandum from George Carver which encloses a CIA study on the Cambodian political situation. The paper paints a gloomy picture of the government's current situation and virtually excludes any possibility of improvement short of a coup by the military against President Lon Nol. (The paper nevertheless suggests that a U.S. proposal on neutralizing Lon Non might be useful, if not successful.)

The CIA study lays most of the blame for the current deterioration on Lon Nol's brother, General Lon Non, and concludes that the present regime probably cannot survive beyond another three to six months. The political deterioration in Phnom Penh has only increased the insurgents' incentive for not negotiating and for stepping up military pressure. While Lon Non's ascendancy following the March 17 events increases the chances for a military coup, key commanders probably would first seek U.S. approval. (The paper contains an annex which discusses in detail the position of various possible coup leaders and supporters in Cambodia.) A successor government, however, would be a better performer, but we cannot expect a dramatic improvement in the military situation.

MORI/CDF C03223177

Staff Comment

We believe the CIA study is ^{id}useful but somewhat alarmist document. We are disturbed by its implications that realistically, only a U.S.-approved coup against Lon Nol will improve the situation, and ^{we}will be sending you a fuller comment on the CIA study. Initially, we raise the following questions concerning the study.

-- Why can't the GKR's slide be extended beyond 6 months? Will the political situation necessarily cause a military and economic collapse, especially considering the reduced combat role of the NVA?

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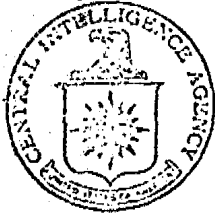
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2

-- Is there anyone we can substitute for Sirik Matak in a new demarche leading to a caretaker government? The CIA study notes that a voluntary departure by the Lon brothers is still a possible solution over the longer term.

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20505

OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR

26 March 1973

MEMORANDUM FOR: Brigadier General Brent Scowcroft, USAF
Deputy Assistant to the President for
National Security Affairs

SUBJECT : Cambodia

1. Per our various conversations, over the past week we have been giving increasing attention to the increasingly messy situation in Cambodia. Last week John Holdridge asked two of my colleagues if the Agency would do an assessment of the course of current Cambodian events -- a project that actually was already in train.

2. Attached are two copies of a memorandum responding to John Holdridge's request and his specific questions. I am also sending copies to Dick Kennedy and, of course, to John Holdridge.

3. This memorandum is an internal Agency product for which we plan no further distribution unless or until you direct otherwise.



George A. Carver, Jr.

Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs

Attachment

cc: Mr. Kennedy ✓
Mr. Holdridge

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26 March 1973

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: The Cambodian Political Situation

Key Judgments

The course of events in Cambodia since 17 March has all but eliminated any near term prospect for achieving greater political unity and stability in Phnom Penh.

Much of the current stress and difficulty within the Lon Nol Government is the result of the machinations and malign behavior of the President's younger brother, Brigadier General Lon Non. Lon Non seems bent on advancing his own fortunes--in the guise of protecting his brother's interests--by systematically denigrating and undercutting every potential rival.

Lon Nol and Lon Non are a symbiotic pair. The chances of inducing Lon Nol to curb Lon Non's activities are minimal. The chances of getting Lon Non out of the country (even via a prestigious Ambassadorship) while Lon Nol remains are virtually nil. Events since 17 March also appear to have precluded the option of encouraging Lon Nol to leave on an extended trip (the medical gambit), with Lon Non along and a solidly based caretaker regime behind.

As a result, the downward spiral in government effectiveness and esprit will continue. But this process can go on for some time before rock bottom is hit. On balance, we believe the regime can muddle through the next three to six months but with mounting political,

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economic and military problems and a diminishing position vis-a-vis the insurgents.

The primary threat to the government's authority during this time frame will come from the military. The present ascendancy of the dangerous and highly unpopular Lon Non makes a military coup a stronger possibility than before, especially if Lon Nol dies or is incapacitated, or if Lon Non tries to purge the military. But key military commanders in a position to move against the government, however, would probably first seek assurances of US approval.

Successful military action against Lon Nol and Lon Non would probably result in a civilian government headed by opposition figures such as Sirik Matak or In Tam and dependent on support from the United States. Such a government would be a better performer than the present regime, but we would expect no dramatic shift in the generally unfavorable military situation. Such a government could serve minimum US interests and objectives in Cambodia equally as well, if not better, than the present government.

Discussion

I. The Events Since 17 March

The bombing attack on the presidential residence in Phnom Penh on 17 March and a violent incident earlier that day between Cambodian Army soldiers and striking teachers and students has ushered in another political crisis. The government has adopted stringent population controls. All forms of public assembly have been banned, foreign travel by Cambodians has been prohibited, stiff censorship regulations have been imposed and the regime has arrested at least 120 actual or suspected civilian critics and oppositionists, including teachers, students, and newspaper editors. Particular attention has been paid to members of the royal family. Virtually all civilian members of the royal family are under house arrest, including President Lon Nol's former close associate Sirik Matak. The government is reportedly thinking of exile for Matak and is also moving to force the disbandment of his opposition Republican Party by intimidating its members. The latest instance of this tactic was an unsuccessful assassination attempt on 24 March against a key Republican and close Matak associate.

Lon Non, the President's younger brother is behind these acts. In the past, he has consistently and successfully sabotaged Lon Nol's intermittent efforts to install Matak as vice-president and broaden the base of his government. Lon Non now appears to have convinced his ailing and shaken brother of the existence of a "royalist-Communist" conspiracy and persuaded the President to let him deal with it. This has in effect given Lon Non a free hand to move against his political enemies, who include some of the most able men in and out of the government. (Lon Non's conspiracy thesis is contrived. The bombing incident of 17 March apparently was the isolated act of a disaffected air force officer while the violence between the strikers and troops was instigated by Lon Non himself).

The events since 17 March impact severely on US interests and policy in Cambodia. Instead of a broadened government including Matak--the most able Cambodian political administrator--Lon Non is well on the way to becoming the dominant political figure in Phnom Penh, if he has not already achieved

that position. Instead of a government shored up to the maximum extent possible in preparation for an eventual negotiated settlement of the Cambodian conflict, the short-term prospects are at best for a continuation of the very low level of government effectiveness.

There is a real danger that Lon Non's ascendancy will prove too great a burden for the already fragile political structure. The Cambodian military, which ultimately holds the key to power, has so far remained on the sidelines watching carefully for signs of US reaction. But a number of key commanders--especially those who may believe themselves to be on Lon Non's blacklist--are dismayed and apprehensive. In this unstable atmosphere, a collapse of the Lon Nol regime as a result of a military move against it becomes a much stronger possibility.

II. Continuation of the Status Quo

A. Short Term Prospects

If the Lon Nol-Lon Non regime continues along present lines, it is headed for eventual collapse. The process of decline, however, could go on for some time before rock bottom is reached. Barring a sudden grab for power by the military, the regime can probably muddle through the next three to six months--but with mounting economic, military and political problems and diminishing position vis-a-vis the insurgents.

On the economic side, the government will continue to face the same intractable problems of corruption, inflation and shortages of rice and other essential commodities. How well it copes will have a distinct bearing on its duration. Trouble is already looming on the horizon. Mounting popular unrest in recent months over rising prices has forced the government to modify some badly-needed economic reforms. As a result of the regime's backtracking, subsidy costs will now rise even higher and--coupled with earlier wage hikes--will feed the country's inflationary spiral and produce even greater problems later in the year. The government may be hard pressed to survive a repetition of last September's serious wave of economic unrest which saw undisciplined troops take the lead in looting rice stocks.

The regime's already bleak negotiating and military prospects have been further diminished by the recent events. The insurgents have shown no interest in negotiating with a regime headed by Lon Nol and will be even less inclined to deal with a government dominated by Lon Non. Both the insurgents and their North Vietnamese backers probably now see little merit in seeking a compromise settlement with a government they possibly judge to be teetering on the brink of collapse. They may try to provide a push by stepping up their military pressure, especially against the capital itself. The insurgents could orchestrate their military pressure by holding out the possibility of a cease-fire and negotiations--providing the Lon Nol government is overthrown.

Insurgent forces are not able to directly challenge the army's control of the Phnom Penh area but they do have the ability to significantly step up sabotage and terrorism in the capital and further erode public confidence in the government. Outside Phnom Penh, the insurgents can be expected to retain the initiative over the dispirited and defensive-minded Cambodian Army through a continuation of their attacks on the main lines of communication and on isolated population centers. The army's ability to contain these actions and to keep open its key supply arteries--Routes 4 and 5 and the Mekong River--will continue to depend to a considerable extent on the availability of US air support.

In sum, we believe that all factors, political, economic and military point toward eventual collapse if the present regime fails to make fundamental changes that have some prospects of reversing the current trends.

II. B. Potential Contenders for Power

Before the more fundamental problems can be addressed, Lon Nol and Lon Non must ride out the immediate political crisis they have created. Since the regime's civilian opposition has been cowed, the only remaining group that has real potential to challenge the brothers' authority is the military. In the past, the military's loyalty to Lon Nol has not been in question. But recently there have been some signs of slippage in the army's support for the President. Some senior officers share concern over the present situation and are united in their strong dislike of Lon Non. Chief among these are Cambodian Army (FANK) Chief of Staff General Fernandez and FANK's three key field commanders. The latter have the capability--

acting in concert under Fernandez' direction--to change the government. Any such move might well be taken in Matak's name and could result in a government headed by him.

Given the present confused and fluid situation in Phnom Penh, such a development cannot be ruled out. We believe, however, that neither Fernandez or any other ranking officer is likely to act without some kind of assurance and encouragement from the US Government. In the event of another crisis such as a major military setback, the death or incapacity of Lon Nol, an especially severe economic crisis, or an effort by Lon Non to extend his political purge to the military, a military move against the government could occur even without US assurances. But even then, Fernandez and his supporters would be hesitant to make common cause against the government if US support clearly continued to rest with Lon Nol. (A more detailed assessment of possible contenders for power within the military and the government's capability to counter a coup is presented at annex.)

III. Some Other Scenarios: Their Feasibility and Consequences

A. Lon Nol and Lon Non out of the country with a caretaker regime in charge

This scenario is based primarily on Lon Nol's well-known dissatisfaction with the slow pace of his medical recovery, and his stated desire to seek additional treatment abroad. Although the President's condition does not call for any surgery at this time, an extended period of diagnostic and therapeutic treatment abroad would be appropriate. In considering this possibility, it had been hoped that Lon Nol would be able and willing to ensure that his younger brother would depart with him, or that in any case Lon Non would not wish to stay without the protection of the President.

Assuming an effective caretaker administration formed by the men of the caliber of Sirik Matak and In Tam, the voluntary departure of the brothers Lon could stabilize the deteriorating political situation and offer some hope of improvement in over-all governmental effectiveness. Freed from the meddling of both brothers, General Fernandez would have a better chance of upgrading the will and ability of the Cambodian Army to fight. Such a caretaker regime

could be counted on to adopt a more realistic and flexible approach to the problem of national reconciliation. The beginning of a constructive dialogue with the Khmer insurgents and their North Vietnamese backers would be facilitated.

Lon Nol has been well aware of the possibility that in such a case a caretaker regime might not "invite" him back. But in our judgment, he was, until recently, prepared to take that risk. Events since 17 March, however, make it clear that Lon Nol now believes his position to be directly threatened and is more than ever before prepared to depend on the advice of his younger brother. Lon Non's acceptance of "exile"--no matter how disguised--has always been the most dubious aspect of the voluntary departure scenario. Given his growing confidence and influence and the President's current siege mentality it is almost certain that the two would not accept a "leave of absence" no matter how forcefully suggested by the US Government. Furthermore, the possibility of forming an effective caretaker administration any time soon is probably out of the question. Based on Matak's bitter anti-Lon Nol remarks made in a press interview after his detention, the break between the two men may now be irreconcilable at least for some time. The voluntary departure scenario may still be a possible solution--but only over the longer term. It will require an end to Lon Non's witch hunting and a period of political reconciliation. How fast the two brothers would move in this direction would depend in large part on the forcefulness of US persuasion.

B. Lon Nol without Lon Non

Lon Non's departure would be a constructive development allowing greater political stability and unity. But it alone would not solve Cambodia's basic political ills and would probably result in only a marginal improvement in government effectiveness. Lon Nol is divorced from reality and increasingly intolerant of all signs of dissent, real and imagined. These characteristics play into his brother's hands and make a bad situation much worse. But the President's own mental condition and his inability to delegate authority are largely responsible for the government's demoralization and drift. Even with Lon Non's negative influence removed, there is no guarantee that fresh blood such as Matak or In Tam could long endure or be effective in a government headed by Lon Nol.

In any case, the possibility of splitting the two brothers now appears as academic as Scenario A. Under

the circumstances, the President is likely to view any suggestion to dispense with his brother's services with deep suspicion. Given Lon Non's pervasive influence and his ability to isolate and "protect" his brother, privileged private discussion of this possibility between the President and the US may no longer be feasible. Nevertheless, a forceful proposal to this effect, even if rejected, would convey a strong sense of US disapproval of the government's recent actions. It could prompt Lon Nol to repair some of the damage done and perhaps be a first step in disengaging the President from his brother's influence.

C. A Lon Non Government

This could come about as a result of Lon Nol's death or incapacitation--possibilities which must be kept firmly in mind given the President's precarious health. There is already a question as to which brother is in effective charge of the government. Nevertheless, we believe that most of Lon Non's clout derives from his role as brother and confidant of the President. Lon Non is intensely disliked by key military commanders and does not have a particularly solid military power base of his own. (See annex) Most of his political entourage consists of young opportunists who hope to advance their careers through Lon Non's links to the palace. We believe that this support would quickly evaporate at the sign of a serious threat to Lon Nol's authority. A Lon Non government would be sure to meet strong opposition. Unless it received direct and unqualified support from the US it could not survive.

D. A New Government without Lon Nol and Lon Non

This could come about in two ways: permanent extension of the caretaker regime envisioned in Scenario A or through a military coup. In either case, the end result would be largely the same--a regime under the leadership of opposition political elements such as Matak and In Tam and a grouping of key military commanders dependent on the support of the United States. Such a government would probably be a better performer than the present regime, but we would expect no dramatic shift in the countrywide military equation which now favors the Communists. In our judgment such a government could continue to protect minimum US interests in Cambodia during the next 3-6 months at least equally as well as, if not better, than the present regime. It could successfully defend Phnom Penh, maintain at least intermittent control of key highways, deny the Vietnamese Communists use of the port facilities at Kompong Som and provide justification for continued US air operations in Cambodia.

ANNEX: Potential Contenders for Power Within the Military

The Cambodian military's previous tendency to avoid involvement in national politics obscures the present play of specific political loyalties within the military establishment and this makes it difficult to predict the likelihood of its playing a more decisive role in the future. The following judgements are the most precise we can make, given the limited information available.

In considering potential military contenders for power in Cambodia, it is necessary to distinguish between those who might want to move against the regime and those who not only might want to move but also have the actual ability to do so. This latter group consists of only four generals, who are discussed below. In addition, the power base of Brigadier General Lon Non is discussed to include an assessment of its strength and capability for countering an attempted coup.

It should be noted that while the motives and loyalties of the potential contenders are relatively apparent, it is difficult to get a firm fix on the present availability of some of the forces that they command. The current disposition of the various forces available to Lon Non is also hard to determine. With the exception of the 13th Brigade Group, substantial elements of all of these forces--which make up most of Phnom Penh's general military reserve--are now committed to clearing operations south and east of the capital along or near Routes 1 and 2. If necessary, these forces could probably return to Phnom Penh within 24 to 48 hours. Assuming that their presence in the capital for political reasons would not be protracted, the Khmer insurgents probably would not be able to take undue military advantage of their temporary withdrawal from the battlefield.

At the moment, the defense of Phnom Penh proper is in the hands of a hodge-podge of at least five brigades, which may total about 15,000 troops. The political loyalties of these units' commanders are not known. Their immediate commander, however, has in the past reportedly been sympathetic to Sirik Matak. Cambodian Army (FANK) Chief of Staff Fernandez has been prohibited from moving any

A-1

general reserve forces without first obtaining the approval of the army's assistant chief of staff for operations. This arrangement was set up last December by Lon Nol as an additional control mechanism for himself over troop units tasked with defending Phnom Penh.

Major General Sosthene Fernandez, FANK Chief of Staff

Fernandez is the key figure to any successful military coup. Without his personal assurances and urgings it is very unlikely that two of the three key FANK field commanders, Brigadier Generals Dien Del and Un Kauv, would act on their own. Without their support the third field commander, Brigadier General Norodom Changtaraingsey could not successfully act against the government.

Fernandez is a generally capable military officer and he appears to have the backing and the respect of most FANK officers. Fernandez has always been loyal to President Lon Nol, but at the same time has been a close friend and associate of Sirik Matak. Under normal conditions, Fernandez probably would not consider moving against Lon Nol. Like most FANK officers, he owes much to Lon Nol for past favors and help. But--again like most FANK officers--he dislikes and distrusts Lon Non. He does not consider Lon Non a competent military officer and resents the ways in which the latter exploits his unique access to Lon Nol. Ever since Fernandez was appointed Chief of Staff in September 1972, Lon Non has tried to discredit his standing with the President. Just prior to the 17 March bombing, an anonymous letter was passed to Lon Nol--probably at the direction of Lon Non--which implicated Fernandez in the recent teacher/student strikes. Only Fernandez' fast reaction to protect Lon Nol on 17 March apparently convinced the latter that Fernandez is loyal and the letter was untrue.

Fernandez, like most Cambodians, is a cautious man and would prefer to wait in hopes that an unpleasant situation might correct itself or disappear rather than have to take action. Although there are no real signs that he is seriously considering action against the government, Fernandez is worried and has stated the government is in for some bad times.

Brigadier General Dien Del, Commanding Officer, 2nd Division

Dien Del is a Khmer Krom officer and one of FANK's

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best field commanders. (The Khmer Krom are ethnic Cambodians from the Delta area of South Vietnam.) He is respected by junior officers and has the loyalty of his troops, which may number as high as 4,000 men. He has been very vocal to personal friends over the past twelve to eighteen months about the drift of the government and FANK's many deficiencies. He dislikes and distrusts Lon Non intensely. Although he has a personal liking for Lon Nol, he no longer believes that the latter is capable of running the government. Dien Del has stated on several occasions in the past few months that the only way to settle the war is to negotiate. He does not like the prospect of a protracted civil war.

Dien Del is first and foremost a military officer. This, combined with his personal feelings towards Lon Non, is likely to make him agreeable to any orders he might receive from Fernandez to move against the present government. He has no strong brief for Sirik Matak, but if he believed that Matak had US backing he probably would give Matak his own support. Currently, some of Dien Del's units are operating south of Phnom Penh between Routes 1 and 2, while others reportedly are deployed west of the capital.

Brigadier General Un Kauv, Commanding Officer, 7th Division

Un Kauv is also a Khmer Krom officer. He is considered to be an excellent field commander, probably the best in FANK. At full strength, his division would total about 7,200 troops. Un Kauv is a close colleague of General Fernandez and, along with Dien Del, has been a steady supporter of the former's attempts to reduce FANK's payroll by eliminating "phantom troops." He apparently has some political ambitions, but realizes that being Khmer Krom is a significant drawback. As early as December 1971, Un Kauv has been identified as an admiring supporter of Sirik Matak. Un Kauv's 7th Division has been carrying the brunt of the fighting on Route 2 near Takeo City near the South Vietnam border.

Un Kauv, like Dien Del, has been critical of Lon Nol and Lon Non and has no military respect for the latter. If approached by Fernandez, he would be likely to cooperate in a move to change the present government. This would be particularly true if Dien Del also were involved.

Brigadier General Norodom Changtaraingsey, Commanding
Officer, 13th Brigade Group

A prince of the royal family, the independent Changtaraingsey controls the area around Kompong Speu, southwest of Phnom Penh, much in the manner of a warlord. His 13th brigade is one of the largest military organizations in FANK and has been estimated to contain as many as 13,000 troops. These men have all been recruited by Changtaraingsey from the Kompong Speu area, are paid by him, and they are loyal to him.

Changtaraingsey is related to and is a strong supporter of Sirik Matak. He is also a life-long friend of Fernandez. While he has remained nominally loyal to the government and Lon Nol, he does not like Lon Non. He has closely guarded his own area and has refused to allow his brigade to be moved outside of it to fight.

Assured by Fernandez of the participation by Dien Del and Un Kauv, he probably would be willing to participate in a bid to oust the present government. Although he might want to try and move against it unilaterally, it is not likely he would succeed.

Support for the Government

Brigadier General Lon Non, Commanding Officer, 3rd Division

The nucleus of any resistance to a coup would almost certainly have to be centered around Lon Non. Lon Non commands the 3rd Division and has about 14 infantry battalions (or some 5,000 troops) under his effective control. Some of these units are currently engaged in clearing operations southwest of Phnom Penh along Route 2. Many unit commanders of the 3rd Division are Khmer Krom. Since Sihanouk was ousted in 1970, the brunt of combat in Cambodia has been borne by Khmer Krom units to the point where their morale, efficiency, and loyalty has been seriously affected. Khmer Krom commanders have become increasingly disaffected by FANK's poor military showing for which they hold Lon Nol responsible. Consequently, the President's standing among them has slipped considerably. Lon Non is even less popular with them.

Major General Thappana Nginn, Minister of Defense

General Thappana Nginn is personally loyal to Lon Nol,

and his political fortunes are linked with those of the President. Nginn does not command any military units, however, and it is doubtful whether he has sufficient personal influence to bring troops to the support of Lon Nol.

Brigadier General Ith Suong, Commanding Officer, 1st Division

Ith Suong commands the 1st Division, elements of which are currently operating along the Mekong River south of Phnom Penh. His troops are not very effective because they lack discipline and training. He has a poor record as a field commander and retains his position because of his personal relationship with Lon Nol. Although Ith Suong is considered loyal to Lon Nol, he dislikes Lon Non.

The Unknowns

There are other miscellaneous military units of varying size (from company to brigade) and effectiveness in the Phnom Penh area. They are commanded by men of unknown ability and loyalty. Like many other FANK units, they are poorly disciplined, trained, and paid. Their loyalty to the present government and their effectiveness in any coup situation is questionable.